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New Directions for Digital Video Creation in the Classroom: Spatiality, Embodiment, and Creativity

Jason Ranker & Kathy Mills

Jason: In recent years, we have both produced scholarship in the area of digital video production or filmmaking in classroom and after school settings. This email conversation between us is a great way for us to share our current thinking on this topic, and the new areas of video composing pedagogy that we are exploring.

Kathy, you've done a lot of exciting work in this area. For example, you have identified conventions and elements that are particular to videotexts, including how image on the screen is constructed, how the figures and actors move through time and space, and the technical conventions that go into filming (Mills, 2011). You have also looked at transmediation in the context of student video composing (Suhor, 2004; Siegel, 2006). In this work, you observed and talked with children to find out how students move meanings across modes—such as the movements from drawing to digital video—and the ways that it is possible to mean differently in each of these modes (Mills, 2011). And, in your study of students' claymation video productions, you looked at how students used video making opportunities to create new types of social spaces in the classroom in which to embed meanings related to their videos (Mills, 2010).

Kathy: Thanks, Jason. I think it is interesting that there are so many connections in our research of video making with students across two very different countries. What immediately comes to mind is the informative piece you wrote on how students assemble multiple semiotic resources from across modes as they compose digital documentary videos about culturally relevant topics (Ranker, 2008). You explored what constitutes a semiotic resource in the context of video composing, and how these resources shape student video composing processes. You then looked at how digital video can be linked up with inquiry projects to create a synergy between multiple media (2007, 2008, 2010) as students use books and the internet to research topics and created digital documentary videos about these topics (books, writing notebooks, digital video, and the internet). I really liked your concept of "media interactivity" (2010), which you describe as a synergistic interaction between media, and "the specific ways that

multimodal composers bring multiple media into play with one another as part of a single, overall composing process" (p. 37).

Jason: I think that digital video composing is an innovative way for teachers to engage their students in multiliteracies (Cope and Kalantzis, 2000). These videos can take on many different forms and fit into curricula in a variety of different ways, including artistic videos, documentaries, claymation, and screenplays, amongst other forms. With so many interesting possible uses of digital video with adolescents, this is a very promising area for teachers and researchers to explore: What areas of video composing pedagogy have you been developing recently?

Kathy: Well, in my latest work I've paid some attention to the socio-materiality of literacy practices – the changing and taken-for-granted tools, computers, mobile devices, pens, books, bodies, toys, nature, spaces, and other tangible dimensions that comprise literacy as social practices (Leander & Sheahy, 2004). I like the concept of embodied or material literacies because it embraces the possibility of attending more consciously to the senses in reading and writing the world. For example, I recently conducted a research project with Allan Luke and colleagues in which students collaboratively created micro-documentaries at a school in a socially disadvantaged district of Queensland, Australia.

The students produced short documentaries of 3-4 minutes about local places in the community (Luke, 2012). An Australian Indigenous elder and educator, John Davis, first taught the children about the cultural significance of the land, the river, the species of trees, and other emplaced meanings. The Indigenous practice of the yarning circle, where we would sit in a circle on the grass outdoors and pass around items such as Eucalyptus leaves, taught us how to attend to the taken-for-granted smells, sights, sounds, and meanings of the land—of "country." We took the students on sensory walks in the neighborhood. Students had to gather "corporeal information" through their moving and sensing bodies as they interacted with nature, their cameras, and interviewed people in the community that inhabited the same landscape (Schatzki, 1997). I gained a heightened awareness of the sensorial and material dimensions of both Indigenous ways of connecting with the land and through artifacts. But I also observed how documenting sensory experiences using cameras is distinctively an embodied literacy practice.

Jason: Where did this idea of materiality in filmmaking originate for you and what other forms might this take?

Kathy: Mm, good question. I see that the sensory dimension of literacy practice was particularly important in the development of the learners' representations of their experiences, ideas, sounds, and feelings through film in their micro-documentaries. For example, the students were lying on the cool grass filming up at the clouds to convey the feeling of relaxation they experienced at a recreation reserve. This was very different to literacy practices that involved postures such as sitting at a desk and writing stories, which in schools, tend to be based on prior experiences or memories. These memories are separated in time and space from the moment of text production, rather than permitting experiences and representation to occur simultaneously. At other times, the students listened to the beautiful bird sounds near a lagoon and tried to capture this in their films. They video recorded their feet as they walked to different places, balance on low walls, or peered through cracks in view things in different ways. The walking feet became a repeated, embodied motif signifying movement to changing spatial locations in this documentary (See Figure 1).

Figure 1 Feet Walking to New Place

I see that the sensorial nature of practice was central to the students' knowledge about the world because knowledge is not only an object captured through mental schemes, but it is also practical and acquired through mind and body. The beauty of filming as a form of representation is that it can be practiced in different places. These are embodied or emplaced social practices of communication that involve more than just the mind or sets of skills.

Jason: So, with video pedagogy, what becomes relevant is not just the idea of space in general, but rather filming space or video space. In other words, the relevance of space becomes very particular to the video being composed. When students and teachers identify a particular filming space, the relevant pedagogical points become more about helping students to identify and shape their intended filming spaces—as well as considering the possibilities for social interaction and emotionality that these identified spaces offer.

Kathy: Yes, these are very relevant points for teachers who are thinking of taking up video production to consider spatiality as an important aspect of their teaching considerations. Jason, what new aspects of digital video creation have you been exploring?

Jason: As a classroom-based researcher, I become really interested when students take video in new directions that challenge norms for making videos at school or do something creative and novel that has some kind of transformative effect. This often happens, for example, when students create videos that bring together elements of their interests, understandings, and sensibilities related to their home life and popular culture, combining these elements with what is available to them at school.

This happened in one of my recent video making research projects in a seventh and eighth grade urban classroom in which the class engaged in a video-making workshop. During this workshop, the students created videos about their chosen topics, composing them with iMovies (which were available on the class notebook computer cart that the teacher checked out) one afternoon each week over several months. This project also involved a class blog for students to post the videos that they made. The blog provided an important medium for displaying the videos and created an audience within the class, since the students could watch each others' videos on their own and then make comments, which fed into the students' creativity (See Figure 2).

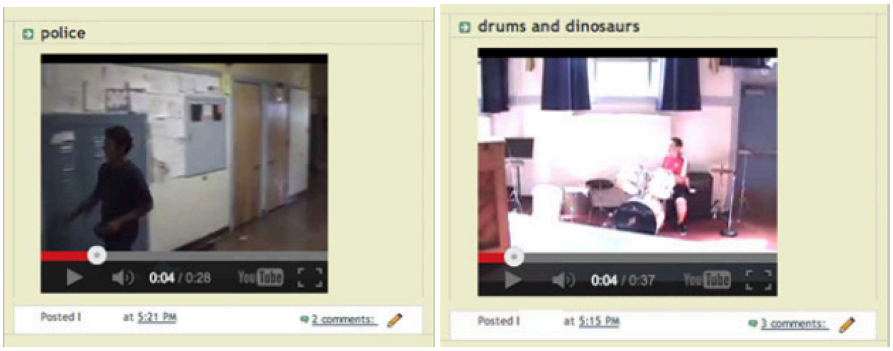

Figure 2 : Screenshots of Two Video Entries on the Class Blog

Kathy: So what do you think helped the students to go beyond merely reproducing of a set of video-making conventions to produce something very creative?

Jason: It was something about the blog and the audience interaction that it afforded that helped to foster a creative environment for video making in this classroom. One direction that some students took was to create videos that I would describe as absurd. As some students created absurd videos, others responded to create absurd videos of their own. And here is where the students pushed the boundaries a bit by bringing something new into the mix in the classroom that had a transformative and productive effect. According to some discourses on teaching and schooling, the making of absurd videos may not be considered a worthy direction for student video making. But the absurd has a long and legitimate tradition in the arts and humanities (Beckett, 1964; Camus, 1955) that can be used to establish a literary value for absurdist pieces composed by students. For example, the "theater of the absurd" (Esslin, 1961) used humorous depictions of characters in stark, meaningless worlds in exploring common absurdist themes such as the unavailability of a unifying meaning for life or comprehensive way of making sense through reason and language. The videos that the students made reflected these themes, relying less on language and linear narration, and including elements such as death as a prominent theme, emphasizing the difference between expectations and what is presented, and extensive use of humor.

Kathy: Jason, this has been a really productive dialogue that has inspired some new ways of thinking about adolescent filmmaking practice. We began with broad theories about the spatiality of digital video production, to focus more specifically on the embodied dimension – the students' bodily experiences of different spaces as they film. When planning filmmaking projects, we need to think carefully about the pre-existing and potential meaning-making materials that are available to students in the filming space, as well as how students can transform these meaning potentials when they take video making in creative new directions.

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